

Imagine the People of God - Imagine: *Ephesians 3:14-21*

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A few days ago on NPR's "All Things Considered" radio program, reporter Don Gonyea did a story on the newly released volume of the Bob Dylan Bootleg series.¹ These recordings are rough, live cuts made inside the studio from January 1965 through March 1966, as Dylan recorded three of his most popular albums, *Bringing It All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde on Blonde*. They give us an inside look at the musical genius.

The NPR story focused on the recording of Dylan's iconic hit 50 years ago, my favorite Dylan song, "Like a Rolling Stone." It's been called one of the greatest rock songs ever recorded. It was a favorite of the Beatles, and it inspired a young 15 year old Bruce Springsteen to become a rocker. Last year, the original hand-written lyrics of the song were sold at auction for 2 million dollars, a record price for song lyrics.

The song is an American classic. Everytime the song comes on, with the opening drum beat and the sound of Hammond Organ, I get chills. But the song did not always sound that way. The behind the scenes recordings reveal that this classic had a rough start. Dylan penned the lyrics, but as he began to put music to it, something was wrong.

Originally, the song was set to $\frac{3}{4}$ timing, a "one, two, three; one, two, three" waltz-like rhythm. Gonyea tells us the story: "They first attempted the song as a waltz. How does it feel? Well, it feels wrong: Dylan's voice breaks, and he's unsure of the words."

"After struggling to make the words fit a time signature that won't yield, the crew calls it a day. Overnight, a decision is made: Play it in 4/4. They try it the next day, and it's immediately better – but it's still missing something. That's when [musician] Al Kooper, who was on hand to play guitar, slips over to the Hammond organ and starts noodling.

Gonyea interviews Al Kooper about this moment: "I was flying by the seat of my pants,' Kooper [later recalls]. "And I was a lucky lad that day."

"And about a minute into [the recording]," Kooper recalls, "Dylan said to [the producer], 'Turn the organ up.' [The producer] said, 'That guy's not an organ player.' And [Dylan] said, 'I don't care. Turn the organ up.' And that was the moment that I became an organ player."

Gonyea ended his report this way: "All of the effort that went into this has been tucked away for 50 years. Now, we all get to hear how they got there: genius, craft, trial and error, dead ends, and the path to a piece of brilliant music history."

¹ Gonyea, Dan, "The Day Dylan Got it Right." <http://www.npr.org/2015/11/06/454900076/the-day-dylan-got-it-right>

Rarely is history made in the first attempt. What these behind-the-scenes recordings reveal is that Dylan is a musical genius not because he can make the perfect song the first time. He's a genius because when he fails, he has the imagination to try it again in a different way.

We are beginning today a sermon series we're calling, "Imagine the People of God." The song we sang a moment ago is the inspiration for our theme, and Paul's letter to the Ephesians will be our guide from scripture. What does a community look like that is living out its call to be the "people of God?"

Imagination is not the first Christian practice we think of. If you want to be a good Christian, you should read your Bible, pray, give generously. But have a good imagination? That's something for kids! Grown-ups don't have time for such things.

Yet, when Paul writes his letter to the Ephesians, his prayer for them is that they would have an active imagination. I like the way *The Message* paraphrases our passage: "I ask God that with both feet planted firmly on love, you'll be able to imagine with all followers of Jesus the extravagant dimensions of Christ's love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God. God can do anything, you know - far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams!"

In other words, Paul wants them to imagine the God-given power to accomplish more than they could imagine.

Our text begins with the phrase, "For this reason." We didn't read the verses before this text, but had we, we would've seen that "the reason" Paul is talking about is his own imprisonment. Paul is in jail, locked up for his faith. Yet there, in the midst of his imprisonment--because of his chains--Paul's imagination is going wild, as he dreams of all that can be accomplished by the "people of God" in Ephesus.

Sometimes, it's when you're stuck somewhere, when there's no way out and you don't know what to do, that your imagination is at it's best.

It was such a feeling that led to the beginning of the first monasteries in Christianity. Faced with a secularization of the church, many Christians in the 2nd and 3rd centuries began to imagine a new way of being the people of God. They thought the cities were corrupting the church, so they set up their own cities of God, communities cloistered away from the rest of the world.

Many of these monasteries were built, literally, on the edge of society. Sometimes on the side of cliffs or in the midst of desert caves. They were places of retreat, where people could flee a secular world and church. It wasn't that they didn't care about the world. This was their way of being "the people of God" in order to save the world.

But the Christians in Ireland had a different way of imagining themselves. Led by people such as St. Patrick, these ancient Celtic Christians built their abbeys in the midst of a town, at a well-traveled crossroad. These abbeys were not shut out from the world but were public places, resources centers for the entire town.

And it wasn't just monks and nuns who lived in these communities. Most of the residents were everyday tradespeople and artists, who lived in community together. Together, they built schools and taught arts and crafts. They planted farms and made clothing. They fed the community and cared for the sick--all the while, centering their life and work in prayer. When they imagined the people of God, they imagined a community that didn't flee society, but transformed it from within, by becoming the hands and feet of Christ in their communities.

To borrow and tweak a line from Bob Dylan, "How does it feel" to be the People of God in our world today? Well, to be honest, it doesn't feel good. Christianity feels so out of synch with our culture today. Like Dylan on those bootleg recordings, our voices crack, the timing is all off, and we are unsure of our words.

The things we have been told would work, do not anymore. The methods of our past are ineffective. There was a day when it seemed everyone came to church, and being "the People of God" meant that we provided an experience of Church for those who showed up on Sunday.

But then, as church moved out of the center of society and life became busier, attendance at church was no longer a given. We had to imagine a new way of being "the People of God". For a while, the church took the early monastic approach. Or maybe we Iowans should call this the "Field of Dreams" approach. "If you build it, they will come." And we built it, by tailoring our worship and programs to attract people and meet needs. This is why we started multiple services, so that church could be more convenient and worship styles more attractional.

But they haven't come like we were promised. Even churches with the best programs and the most engaging worship experiences are having a hard time attracting the people they once did. And in the midst of this disorientation, we are beginning to imagine again what it means to "be the people of God."

What does "the people of God" look like in our time and place? To be honest, I'm not sure. Our community is changing. Christianity is changing. The future is uncertain. But one thing that is certain: Christ's creative, imaginative power is still at work within us.

Paul's imagination from his prison cell, isn't limited to worship services, and programs, and attractions. Paul imagines a people right in the midst of the world, with deep roots in God's extravagant love so that a selfish and self-obsessed society cannot change them.

This people of God that Paul imagines is alive with God's power, existing to transform the world with a power that is able to face any challenge and accomplish more than the limits of their imaginations.

There's an ancient hymn called "The Prayer of St. Patrick", that is believed to be written by St. Patrick himself, the leader of the ancient, imaginative Celtic Christianity.

The hymn ends this way:

*"Christ shield me today
 Against wounding
 Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
 Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
 Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
 Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down,
 Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,
 Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
 Christ in the eye that sees me,
 Christ in the ear that hears me.
 I arise today
 through the mighty strength
 Of the Lord of creation."*

To be the people of God, is to imagine Christ in us and all around us, Christ in our lives, changing the world through our hands and feet. Being "the people of God" is not being a static church in the midst of a changing world. It's not about what we do in here, in this sanctuary, but about what we do out there, in the world.

Being "the people of God" is about imagining anew, in every time and place what Christ can do here and now, through us.

Can you imagine it? Can you imagine God doing more through us than we could even ask or imagine? Can you imagine the people of God?

Amen.